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SIPDIS

STATE FOR NEA DAS ROBERT DANIN

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SUBJECT: ISRAELI NSC SAYS CLARITY NEEDED ON HAMAS IN NEW
PALESTINIAN GOVERNMENT

Classified By: DCM Gene A. Cretz. Reasons: 1.4 (b, d).

SUMMARY

1. (C) During their January 25 meeting at Israel's National Security Council, NSC Director MGEN (Ret.) Giora Eiland and his deputy, Eran Etzion, told NEA DAS Robert Danin the following:

-- USG, GOI and Quartet statements on a HAMAS presence in the new Palestinian government need to be clear and consistent. Israel will not accept any former or current HAMAS members serving in any cabinet or sub-cabinet position. HAMAS will have to limit its role to the parliament, or Israel will be forced to react as it deems appropriate. The GOI believes that Palestinian Authority (PA) Chairman Mahmud Abbas does not understand this, and that HAMAS will use any ambiguity to press for a presence in the new government.

-- Two issues need to be addressed in the immediate term: (a) expectations about the new Palestinian government's behavior need to be clear. Israel is concerned that the EU will apply "weak standards" in defining this, and that this will encourage the Palestinians to "play games." Israel wants the U.S. to ensure that the EU raises the bar; (b) performance benchmarks for the new Palestinian government need to be pegged against a short timeline. Because of perceived gains by Hizballah in the new Lebanese government, the GOI believes that the Palestinians must be presented with realizable performance benchmarks pegged to a timeline ranging between a few weeks and a few months. These benchmarks should be reasonable so that PA Chairman Abbas can succeed in implementing them. The benchmarks should put HAMAS in a difficult situation. (NOTE: Neither Etzion nor Eiland elaborated on how to make the situation difficult for HAMAS. END NOTE.)

-- The NSC believes that the Egyptians and Saudis could influence HAMAS in a positive direction, if the U.S. were to ask them to play a more significant role than they have to date. Cairo and Riyadh should be asked to pressure HAMAS to accept certain conditions -- including recognition of the state of Israel, renunciation of terrorism, and disarmament -- as a price for joining a Palestinian coalition government.

-- The NSC believes that any expectation of further unilateral withdrawals by Israel from the West Bank is unrealistic. END SUMMARY.

CLEAR AND CONSISTENT POSITION ON HAMAS NEEDED

2. (C) Eiland and Etzion said that the USG, GOI and the Quartet should issue a coordinated, clear and consistent statement that no former or current HAMAS members should be allowed to hold any positions in the new Palestinian government. Both stressed that Israel will not accept former and current HAMAS members serving as civilian ministers, sub-ministers, or even clerks and secretaries, as, from a practical point of view, HAMAS' occupation of such positions would jeopardize Israeli-Palestinian coordination that has taken place to date. They stressed that they do not wish to see cooperation with the PA discontinued.

3. (C) Etzion pointed to the fact that the last Quartet statement said specifically that former HAMAS members could be cabinet ministers. Etzion claimed that the wording suggested that HAMAS members beneath the ministerial level were acceptable. He said this ambiguity needed to be closed. "Otherwise," he said, "HAMAS will cross over from the legislative branch into the executive branch, and we will start down a slippery slope."

4. (C) Eiland and Etzion said they are confused about the U.S. position regarding whether the USG will deal with a PA that has HAMAS members in it. They referred to recent press statements by USG officials to the effect that the Lebanon model might be applicable, i.e., that the U.S. will deal with a government, but not with ministers that are members of

Foreign Terrorist Organizations. Eiland and Etzion stressed that the Palestinians are behaving as if they see no cost to having HAMAS members in a future Palestinian government. "The lack of clear USG and GOI messages may lead HAMAS to insist that it has people in the government," they said. DAS Danin responded by pointing to the Secretary's statement of January 11 that armed groups have no place in the democratic process. Eiland and Etzion replied that they are not sure that the Palestinians have accepted this position.

15. (C) Eiland and Etzion said that the Palestinians must be told that if former and current HAMAS members take up positions in the executive branch, they will not enjoy the privileges accorded to their positions, and international financial support for the Palestinians will cease. Eiland allowed that if HAMAS wins the elections, Israel might be forced to completely lock down the Gaza Strip and tell the Palestinians, "If you have problems, go to Egypt for help." Eiland clarified that this would be a worse situation than that which the Palestinians face today in which there are occasional crossing closures: "We are talking about no cooperation whatsoever. Even in the bad old days with Arafat, we had some cooperation. The more HAMAS is part of any administration, the more measures Israel will have to take to show that it is unacceptable."

CLARITY ON TERRORISM, AND QUICK PERFORMANCE TO BENCHMARKS

16. (C) Etzion stressed that there are two main issues that need to be addressed in the immediate term as the Palestinian elections wrap up, and the government begins to form:

A) Firewall: The "firewall" between what is terrorist, and what is not, must be sound. Israel is afraid that HAMAS and PA Chairman Abbas will try to find an accommodation by forming loose arrangements that blur this distinction. Etzion said that the EU would ultimately set the quality standard because it always sets the lowest standard. In this case, the U.S. and Israel will need to get the EU to raise the bar. The best way is to start by setting it high. Etzion stressed, "Israel will be opposed to anything that blurs the line between the good and the bad sides in the international community. Hizballah does this very well. We cannot accept game-playing, as this makes a mockery of anything that you want to implement."

B) Time: Israel needs to see the new Palestinian government perform to agreed-upon benchmarks that are pegged to a timetable of "no less than a few weeks, but no more than a few months." Etzion said "The Israeli position will be that a clear timetable must be agreed upon. This will put pressure on the new Palestinian government and HAMAS." Etzion suggested that if a political crisis ensued as a result, and Abbas were forced to step down, it would be unfortunate for Israel because of Abbas's departure, but would likely result in HAMAS being blamed for failure -- something Israel would welcome. Etzion added, "I am sure the Europeans would not want a political crisis and Abbas' resignation, but it is an acceptable price for Israel to pay."

17. (C) Eiland stressed, however, that Israel wants to see Abbas succeed, "even though he has avoided commitments." In order to make this more likely, Abbas should be presented with "realizable benchmarks" that require minimal performance of the new PA. These benchmarks should include statements, laws and reforms, especially in the security area, and should be agreed upon by the USG and the GOI. Eiland said that Israel would do nothing to undermine the PA's efforts in meeting the benchmarks. At the end of a few months, Israel would then evaluate the performance. If Abbas delivers, there should be some significant rewards, including progress on a Gaza seaport, and a meeting between the Israeli PM and Abbas. Eiland admitted there is a low probability that this "best possible scenario" will materialize, but stressed that it is important that Israel "give a chance to even a partially reliable partner. It is a genuine Israeli interest not to choose unilateralism before Abbas has one last chance."

EGYPT AND SAUDI ARABIA COULD POSITIVELY INFLUENCE HAMAS

18. (C) Eiland and Etzion said that they believe the Egyptians and Saudis could influence HAMAS in a positive direction, if the U.S. were to approach them. First, the U.S., Israel and Abbas need to agree upon benchmarks. Then, the U.S. could encourage Egypt and Saudi Arabia to urge HAMAS to "do the right thing." Eiland and Etzion stressed that now is the perfect time to talk to the Egyptians, Saudis, Jordanians and other Arabs. They recommended that the USG use the following approach: "We are walking into a disaster. The PA is about to collapse. You need to play a more significant role than you have done to date. To Egypt: You should consider taking over Gaza when it plunges into a Somalia-like chaos. You

could do this with Saudi Arabia's political cover. You could even have a role in the West Bank. To Jordan: Like, Egypt, you could help to facilitate transit between the West Bank and the Gaza Strip."

19. (C) Eiland and Etzion clarified that they were trying to be optimistic: "With pressure, you could force HAMAS into a coalition under conditions that are acceptable to all of us. These conditions would include recognition of the state of Israel, renunciation of terrorism, and disarmament."

10. (C) Etzion said he will look at the Letters of Mutual Acceptance that were signed by Rabin and Arafat to see if there is language that could be useful in working out "mutual recognition," or at least "unilateral recognition by HAMAS." He stressed that the U.S. and Israel need to avoid "mushy recognition of the PLO variety," and need to strike the right balance between concrete and symbolic steps that HAMAS would be required to make.

FURTHER ISRAELI UNILATERALISM IS NOT A REALISTIC OPTION

11. (C) Etzion said that when Israel's policy-making community initially looked at disengagement, it never thought of further steps, e.g., additional withdrawals from the West Bank. Instead, the thinking was that disengagement would lead to a stable situation in the West Bank. Etzion said that Israel is now somewhat disappointed with the results of disengagement due to the terrorist attacks that followed and the increase in Qassam rocket launches. "Now, it seems," Etzion said, "that a second unilateral move seems impossible, especially after the rise of HAMAS. Pulling out of the Gaza Strip was an easy sell to the Israeli public. Pulling out of the West Bank would be a much harder thing to sell."

12. (C) Etzion said that the current situation pales in comparison, however, to what Israel would face in a PA run by HAMAS. There is no way that Israel would be able to disengage from the West Bank without a very basic security regime in place. If Israel were to withdraw now, Qassam rockets would find their way into the West Bank, and would be launched against strategic targets like Ben Gurion Airport. Etzion said that the GOI has not made up its mind on this issue right now, but would be reluctant to withdraw from the West Bank in the face of a "rogue Palestinian state and no reliable partner."

13. (U) This cable has been cleared by NEA DAS Robert Danin.

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JONES